Power, culture, identity, and the work of Anthony Smith

Contribution: Roundtable symposium on Anthony Smith's work.

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It is an honour to participate in a commemoration of Anthony Smith's work. I didn't know Anthony well, but always found him very friendly and collegial in our interactions around ASEN. He made a huge and lasting contribution to the study of nationalism, through his writing, teaching, and guidance and leadership in regard to ASEN and the journal *Nations and Nationalism*. Whether one agrees or disagrees with his main arguments, one must recognise his fundamental influence on the field of nationalism studies.

Anthony was not one to generate highly formal theories, with social 'mechanisms' and causal hierarchies. There were few if any diagrams full of causal arrows. What he specialised in was *conceptualisation*, the formulation of 'ideal types', illustrated and fleshed out through his vast comparative knowledge of historical cases. In this regard, even though he didn't present himself as 'Weberian', that is the broad theoretical approach with which one might most associate him. Because of this he has left his mark on our conceptual vocabulary: '*ethnies*' (aristocratic and demotic) (1989), *mythomoteurs* (1986, adapted from John Armstrong, 1982), 'golden ages' (1986), 'chosen peoples' (2003a), and so on. Each of these identify and abstract recurrent themes in the study of nationalism that call out for explanation. Such typological thinking is a necessary step in theorising, reducing the welter of fact to key patterns and relationships to be explained (Lenski 1994).

Anthony's other main contribution in my view was to constantly direct our attention to the problem of historical continuity, through what came to be known as the 'ethnosymbolic approach' (2004). This argued for the enduring cultural continuities between modern nations and the ethnic formations that preceded them, and that this was basic to understanding the modern phenomenon. I myself come closer to the kind of 'modernist' position that Anthony was often critical of, being more concerned with what has changed with the formation of modernity, and how the modern nation reflects those changes (of which, more in a moment). But I appreciate the way he challenged a kind of 'lazy modernism' in which the 'modern' and the 'premodern' (or 'traditional') are defined as logical opposites—all rupture and no continuity (cf. Grosby 2018). Clearly it is more complicated than that, and however transformed, much of the modern world has deep historical roots. The theoretical problem here was perhaps best summed up once by the anthropologist Julian Steward, who spoke of the form-function concept, that is, that the same social functions can be served by different social forms, and the same social form can serve different social functions (Steward 1972: 91). This makes the tracking of continuity over time very tricky.

One example of this problem can be found in the histories of European aristocracies, which span the 'traditional/modern' divide. Simple talk of the crisis and decline of aristocracy in the face of modernity fails to capture the continuous transformation of these groups from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries. It is a story of new functions and retooling as these evolved from feudal warrior castes, to

administrators of expanding absolutist bureaucracies, and a leadership class for newly professionalised and technologized armies, all the while with numbers being replenished by non-noble rising classes. Noble social and political authority changed, but persisted throughout the modern period, only going into steep decline in the 20th century, with the organisational rise of the modern constitutional state and the modern corporation (Asch 2003; Dewald 1996).

I would make two further points in regard to Anthony's attention to the historical dimension of nationalism. First, today some might argue that questions of the history and origins of nationalism are old hat and theoretically threadbare[1]. I myself have suggested that the 'primordialist vs. modernist' debates have become somewhat exhausted, positions having been argued to a standstill (Hearn 2006: 7-8). One might just say 'we live in a world of nations—who cares how they got here—let's just try to understand how they work now'. But we can't escape the past that easily. How modern nations got here bears upon what they are. The nations we find ourselves in today are not timeless systems, they are the latest effects of long, complex and shifting chains of causation. More methodologically, whether one sees historical rupture or historical continuity in the emergence of modern nations, depends on how you define the object and what questions you are asking about it. Some questions point towards long causal chains into the past, others less so.

The second point is that, unlike some, I've never seen Anthony's work as exemplifying a kind of 'cultural essentialism' in contrast to 'social constructionism' (see the exchange between Umut Ozkirimli (2003) and Anthony Smith (2003b) in

Nations and Nationalism). I would say 'we are all social constructionists now', including Anthony, in the sense that it is standard to see social life as assembled out of institutions and conventions that are artificial human creations, not just given by nature. He clearly appreciated that the ideas and identities that constitute nationalisms are socially constructed, made of pliable symbolic materials. That is what ethnosymbolism asserts. The point for Anthony was that these social constructions are deeply embedded in human experience, and remarkably durable in many cases.

Like Anthony, part of my work has been concerned with questions of national identity (Hearn 2001; Smith 1991). However, I am aware that my thinking here has developed somewhat in resistance to Anthony's, so exploring that tension may be instructive. Anthony saw strong patterns of national identity, of social investment in the reality and authenticity of the national group, as a factor contributing to the longevity and survival of nations. In the ethnosymbolic approach, the strength of symbols, myths and memories explains the persistence of nations. As he put it in his late work on the sacred religious sources of national identity:

> … the more of the different kinds of sacred foundations a given nation possesses, and the richer and more varied their cultural resources, the more persistent and adaptable to change is the corresponding national identity likely to be. The members of those present day nations that can boast a rich heritage of such cultural resources in relation to community, territory, history, and destiny and are more likely to retain their sense of national

> identity and ensure the survival of their national community, despite the increasing pressures for radical change and cosmopolitan assimilation (2003a: 260).

Conversely he says, those with weaker 'sacred foundations' and 'cultural resources' are more likely to lose cultural focus and succumb to such changes (Ibid.). This is a characteristic assertion in Anthony's work. In this view, strong cultural identity generates power—the power to endure. No doubt there is some truth to this, but I've always felt it sort of begs the question, where does strong cultural identity come from in the first place, other than just 'the past'? There is a strong, quasi-functionalist[2] claim in Anthony's work that cultural identities serve a fundamental ontological need for 'authenticity' and orientation in the world, and that national identity is the premier form of cultural identity in the current age. It is this claim that has caused many to see essentialist and primordial tendencies in his thinking.

As I've suggested, I tend to approach questions of identity from the other end. Not 'how does identity create power', but 'how does power create identity'? This happens in at least two ways (Hearn 2012: Ch 10). First, in the way that forms of social organisation bestow powers on their members through enhanced collective capacity to achieve ends. Members identify most strongly with their kin group when it is achieving dominance over others, with the corporations that employ them when they are expanding and gaining reputation, with their nation-states when they are growing GDP and winning wars. But when any form of social organisation reaches its limits, loses standing in relation to its comparators, and starts to bear down more

heavily on its members in response, that is when identification with the organisation either goes soft, as people question their allegiances, or goes extreme, if people can see no alternatives.

The second way that power creates identity is in opposition. When the people in one organisation or group hold power over others, those so dominated will tend to construct identities as counterfoils to that domination, to define their identities against their oppressors. And this of course is a central motif in nationalism studies, in the appeals to local, authentic folk cultures that resist the powers of colonising civilisations. But here the very intensity of identification is understood as an effect of the power relationship and how it is met, not a pre-existing resource that then determines survival.

Of course both of these forms of power, the collective power of the organised group, and the oppositional powers between such groups, are constantly interacting, generating, consolidating, and also disassembling social identities. This is not to argue that identities are therefore secondary and insignificant. Just as a strong, seemingly coherent ideology can enhance the power of a group or organisation, the same is true of identity. I do not share the extreme scepticism of some in our field about the usefulness of the concept of identity (Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Malešević 2011). It seems to me that social identity is a real phenomenon, an observable framework through which people act, and are acted upon. But for me the most interesting questions are about how identities evolve in response to dynamics of power.

I confessed earlier to being a kind of modernist, and the way I think about identity bears upon how I conceptualise modern nationalism. Where some 'modernists' tend to think of nations and nationalisms as effects of the rise of the modern economy (Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992) or the modern state (Breuilly 1993; Tilly 1975) I am inclined to see them as overarching responses to the 'problem of rule': how is authority to be achieved in societies in which strong kinship bonds and hereditary right to rule (backed up by force) have weakened? The classic answer of the eighteenth century rebels and revolutionaries was to revalorise democracy and claim that the authority to rule rested not in aristocracies, but in a mysterious body called 'the people' (no longer a dangerous mob). Modern nationalism is a perennial need to answer, and re-answer the question, who are these people? What are they like? What do they want? The modern problem of rule, of centralised authority serving a self-governing mass society, creates the need to fashion and refashion answers to this question (Bendix 1978; Poggi 1978).

To return to Anthony's work, although I disagree with his recurring argument for the historical continuity of ethnic and national identity, I recognise the detail and scope of his analysis of the various ways that 'the peoples' get constructed: through narratives of 'chosenness', myths and rituals of community, visions of golden ages in the collective past, attributions of sacredness to identity itself. These types are analytically significant because they can be shown to recur over many cases, raising questions about underlying continuities of symbolic form. But the deeper root of our disagreement here is not really one of matters of fact and evidence, it is one of

conceptualisation. For Anthony nations are, by definition, continuous, self-same historical entities. For myself, as just stated, they are by definition a shifting and unstable response to a situation, the modern problem of rule. On some level, we are just not talking about the same thing, because we conceptualise it differently.

Anthony was part of a now passing generation of nationalism scholars who generated a remarkable set of influential books and articles in the field from the 1980s—Gellner, Hobsbawm, Anderson, Connor. That fertile set of ideas was then set in intellectual motion by historical events: the collapse of the USSR and its aftermath, 9/11 and 'war on terror', and more generally the diverse impacts of 'globalisation' on nations and nation-states. In recent years I have wondered if that impulse, that wave of focused intellectual energy, was starting to dissipate. Are we running out of things to say about nationalism? But recent political events in my original (US) and adoptive (UK) homelands have given me a grim conviction that the study of nationalism is alive and kicking, or at least should be.

The rise of a new populist politics in the UK and the US, manifest in the events of Brexit and the election and presidency of Donald Trump, are the most prominent examples of a larger global trend of wide and deep disenchantment with established political orders, which seem not to be adequately answering the question: who are we, and how do we want to rule ourselves? We are seeing deep social and cultural divides within countries concerning how the question should be answered. And I am sure some of the new answers, on both sides of these divides, will involve the

perennial symbolic forms Anthony paid such close attention to—chosenness, collective sacrifice, lost golden ages, and so on.

Just as Brexit and Trump reveal already established crises of national identity, particularly in advanced capitalist economies under complex pressures from globalisation and neoliberal ideology, a host of other looming problems and issues are likely to put further strain on these and other nation-states. Heightened capitalist competition around the globe, intensified struggles over key resources (water, food, energy), ecological impacts of global warming, geopolitical struggles for influence in the Middle East and claims on the South China Sea, the possible dissolution of the European Union, continuing flows of migrants and refugees, and their reception in lands of refuge. The list could go on. The point is that all these pressures are likely to intensify both the claims of states on the national identities of their members, to bolster national power, and the conflicts between nations that deepen oppositional identities in resistance to external power.

Perhaps the 'primordialist versus modernist' debates can now be left to Smith and Gellner to carry on in some afterlife, some Warwick Debate in the sky. The forces just enumerated 'reassure' me that there are new debates about the nature and fate of nations and nationalism waiting just over the horizon. While the historical triggers of these debates change, the pertinence of nationalism persists. The current global situation is not one I would have chosen, but the study of nationalism within it strikes me as being as urgent as ever. Anthony's legacy is one of the pillars on which future study will be built.

[1] This point has been made to me in personal communication by both Jon Fox and Marco Antonsich.

[2] An attribution I'm sure he would object to, see Smith 1973!

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